

THE MILLER'S SEAL*

By OCTAVE THANET

Theron Dale sat upon the edge of the platform of the grist mill, watching the last grinding of the day. On his right hand, the shining steel disc hissed through the last wet log, for Rhett & Dale, "Planters & Plantation Supplies," were economical, and ground corn with the same engine that sawed logs or ginned cotton. Behind Dale, two negroes, whose black skins glistened with the heat of the work, were shoveling corn into the hopper, and a dusty white man was filling the sacks for a little group of waiting customers. It would not seem that the languid figure in white duck trousers and pink-and-white shirt had any part in the busy motion of the scene; yet, in fact, not a man there but threw an extra bit of vigor into his muscles because of the pink-and-white shirt between him and the cotton fields.

The day was closing, and already the sun was veering toward the west, flooding the mill with a sultry glow. The dust rose from the machinery and from the piles of corn on the floor, and there was a smell of meal and stale oil in the air. But along the river bank, under the shade of the great water oaks, the grass had a jeweled glow and freshness. It looked cool by the river, and it looked cool on the old-fashioned galleries of the houses scattered among the fields; and coolest of all it looked under the maple trees where the hammock was swung in the colonel's yard.

Theron knew that the drift of white skirts over one side of the hammock meant that Lee was swinging in it. He knew just how her graceful head was looking, flung back on the red pillow, the smooth, black hair a little ruffled. Lee's face always was pale—not sallow, but pale with the

*Published in The Northwestern Miller 1897.

soft moonlit pallor of a pure olive skin. There would be a book in her hands, and her long black lashes would be the blacker against her white cheek. It was not a frock of pure white that she would be likely to be wearing, but a thin, white stuff, sprigged with roses; and he almost thought he could distinguish the floating ends of pink ribbon at her belt. How cool and dainty and sweet she must be looking; and the young fellow who watched her was to marry her in two months; yet his brows knitted themselves, and he crushed a sick sigh between his teeth. In fact, never, since a little, little boy, he had cried himself asleep at night because his mother was dead, and nearly broke his neck climbing to the top of the house, in the fantasy that he, from that height, might look up into heaven, where she was, had Theron been so miserable.

And one little month before, he had been so satisfied with his world and himself. Rather a small world for a brilliant Harvard man—an Arkansas plantation, heavily mortgaged and losing money every year until Theron had bought up the mortgages and put his keen eyes and clear brains into the concern. However, if a man has a crowd of doctors insisting that a hemorrhage, brought on by over-training at rowing, is a serious matter, he cannot stay in Massachusetts, no matter how enticing his prospects. There happened to be an uncle, a cotton factor, in Memphis; and he called it a good bargain when he sold the mortgages cheap to Theron, saying, truly, "Old Colonel Rhett is one of the finest gentlemen in the South, and the soul of honor, though a trifle antiquated and lavish in his methods, and the land is splendid." He added, not knowing that he was to be a true prophet, "You'll make money out of it."

Theron had made money. He had seen the possibilities of cotton hulls and fat stock; and the hole in the cotton crop during bad years was filled by cattle and hogs. The boys occasionally came down South to try his hunting; he was near enough to the railway to keep a capital wine cellar and an ice house; and, when the earth began to reek with the deadly August and September vapors, he sped away to the seashore and civilization. And every year he realized afresh how small a man he was in his own country, and

how large a figure he was growing to be in the Southwest. He brought from Harvard that gentle outward modesty and strong inward self-respect peculiar to the famous university; and each year of his success entrenched him in his own and other people's good opinion, and made it pleasanter for him to be of importance.

Whether he really looked like Colonel Rhett's only son, who died the year before he came, is not of any particular interest; the Colonel thought that he did, and his heart clave to the boy from the first. Theron was good to the old soldier, who seemed to him such an artless combination of rustic and aristocrat; and he was not aware that his goodness had any quality of condescension. The Colonel was a widower, with one child, a daughter; and Theron was glad when he began to perceive in his reveries a constant appreciation of Lee Rhett's sweetness. "Rather a sensible sort of a joke were I to fall in love with Lee," he mused. "After all, it is better to be well and strong in Arkansas than to die in Massachusetts, God bless her; and a southern wife wouldn't be always wanting to go home. What a pretty way she has of holding her head, the little witch; and what funny things she says, and how innocent she is, and sweet! And it would just serve Aunt Milly right for her tantrums if I were to get married!"

It fell out very much as he had planned. Lee accepted him, shyly; but he was not so much in love as to be blind to the signs of her affection; the Colonel rejoiced, with frank and exceeding joy; and Theron felt a placid satisfaction.

Was it only a month ago that all this was his? Why, out of his very security he had evoked regrets. He would grow pensive, of an evening, sitting on his veranda and watching the lights fade out of the gray bulk of the Colonel's house. He would wonder to himself, was he not frittering his talents and his fine education away, in a mere rural lotus-eater's paradise. His heart would contract with a mighty pang because he had no grand passion for Lee. "Idiot!" he snarled, recalling his confidence; and, in a spasm of irritable anguish, he leaned with such force on the slight railing before him that it snapped under his grip. He laughed, the kind of laugh that a man jerks out of inexpressible self-disgust.

"Finish the toll," he called to the white man; and then, bounding off the platform, he approached the little group waiting for their corn.

They looked up civilly at his approach, but with a visible embarrassment, and Pyram Gode nearly swallowed his quid of "Orphan Boy."

Old Man Rainey, who had always been a warm admirer of the young northerner, ever since they went on a bear hunt together, was the only one to speak.

"Laws! ain't it mighty hot, today?" said he; "say, Mist' Dale, anything new 'bout them postoffice robberies? We all is sorter hangin' round, waitin' on the comin' of the inspector, or whatever he names himself. My boy, jest come, says he seen him on the yon side er the creek in a buggy with—" the old farmer cleared his throat, and his faded eyes evaded Theron's unconsciously stern gaze—"with Sheriff Vassall."

Unless an almost imperceptible hardening and settling in the lines may be called a change in a face, there was no change in Theron's. His keen, dark-blue eyes did not waver, not a flicker of color crept into his fair, freckled cheeks; it was only that the half smile on his face broadened and stayed.

"Rainey, I wish you would ask Baxter to see the inspector, if he comes, and fetch him over to the Colonel's and have them told there; I'm going to ride down to the creek and meet the Colonel; and we'll both be back before sundown."

Rainey assented stolidly; but the men watched Theron walk away with curious interest. They saw him speak a few words with the men at the mill, and then, just as the whistle sounded for closing, a bay horse galloped out of Theron's yard and dashed, tail and mane streaming in the hot air, along the road to the woods.

Theron did not turn his neck, but he knew they were staring after him.

"I dare say they think I am going to light out," he thought. "Every man jack of 'em believes that I am a thief!"

He ground his teeth as he rode. "And how easy it

would be to get out of the whole infernal folly of it, if—" He looked up at the glowing sky with an expression of bewildered torture. "If I didn't know—no, by God, I *don't* know! I only have a hideous, hideous suspicion!" He rode on, at the same furious pace, with his head on his breast. He rode until he came to the ford, where he expected to meet the Colonel, who had gone that afternoon to examine some horses offered in part payment of a note. The Colonel had said he would return by the lower ford.

Arrived at the ford, Theron halted, to wait. His mood was too impatient to permit him to remain, like a statue, upon his horse. Dismounting, he tied the creature to the limb of a tree, in the southern fashion, by her bridle, thus leaving him free to pace up and down. Often had he felt the placid beauty of the scene, the great gum trees bending their rich leafage over the narrow stream, the moss-painted trunks rising out of the water, and the vista of shady road beyond, dappled with sunlight. Today he saw nothing, neither did he hear the birds trilling in the tree-tops and the soft rustle of the breeze.

"I have to think it out, and I have to tell him," he kept saying; "Oh, Lee, my little, gentle Lee, how can I?" His mare turned an inquisitive eye on him, trampling the twigs under her feet. Then she surveyed the branch to which her bridle was slung and pulled at it, in an unobtrusive way. What a miserable, humiliating, useless agony it was, he was thinking—impossible to conceive, had it not happened. When did the first of the trouble come? Wasn't it more than a month ago that the Colonel came to him? People sending registered letters through the Silverhurd postoffice complained that their money was lost.

The Colonel, being postmaster, waxed angry. Theron thought it might be some one on the cars, but the Colonel explained that their inspector ("sharpest man on the road, sir; I have a great regard for him; genial gentleman, too, and a great wag, when you get him off duty") had narrowed the circle of inquiry down to their own territory. "You see," said the Colonel, "two mail routes intersect at our office"—making an angle out of his forefingers, with much earnestness—"the two mail riders come in every

evening, and the mail stays here all night and goes out in the morning, right straight to Zoar; don't wait no time at all, you may say, at Zoar, and that is why it looks like—why, d—n it, it looks like that money was stolen *here!*"

"Why couldn't it be stolen before it gets here?"

"Because it's been stolen on both roads, sir—both roads stopping here!"

"Well, why couldn't it have been stolen in the cars after it leaves here?"

"Because, sir, there is a third route, that strikes the railway at Zoar, and not a registered letter on that route has been tampered with! That's why, sir. Theron, there's been thieving right here, right in Silverhurd; and *I* propose to find out the thief!" He took an indignant turn across the narrow office (they were in the store at the time of the discussion), then he approached Theron, with the half-wistful smile that his features often wore when he made a business proposition of any kind to the young northerner. He had grown to an appreciation of the latter's shrewdness, and he was divided between a craving to win this uncommonly keen young man's approbation and a fear of his ridicule. Theron found his humility more amusing than pathetic, but of late it did not amuse him.

"Yes?" said Theron.

"I've—I've sent for a lot of detective stories by a man named Doyle, and I'm studying them up—showing how to work up a case, you know. What do you think of it?"

THERON did not deny himself a laugh, and he fancied that the Colonel looked wounded, although he was good-natured and protested that, anyhow, the time wasn't lost, for they were capital stories.

But after that he had said little, and Theron let him putter with clues, unmolested. It seemed to him that, of all possible detectives, the Colonel, who could only be kept by main force from going on the bonds of all his old army friends and giving credit at the plantation store to every miserable renter who had sickness and a large family, and who trusted every tale of woe that he met on the streets when he went to St. Louis, was the least likely to run a clever rascal to earth. And clever, Theron admitted the

rascal to be. Ever since the first rumor of loss, the two partners had allowed no one except themselves to touch the mail. The mail-bag was locked at night and placed within a locked desk, either Theron or the Colonel keeping the key. The one clue that they seemed to have (though the Colonel made much more of it than Theron, thanks to his reading), was that, during comparatively careless days when the key had been kept in the desk used for the letters, it had been lost all day and finally found in a place where the clerk who found it swore he had searched before. But in vain did Theron shadow the mail boy and the two clerks. His shadows, he suspected, took their mission in ill part and reported nothing. Lately, in addition to bolts and bars, a mastiff of approved fidelity and a spry and vigilant little rat terrier had guarded the store. Yet, a week or so after this combination of vigilance and strength had been locked up nightly, Pyram Gode sidled up to the counter and reported the loss of a registered letter. Pyram was a sallow, complaining man, to whom the Colonel never gave credit since he had turned informer on a whisky peddler. He did not trade at the store, but he came there for his mail. "Tain't the letter, reely," he explained, "that's ben lost; it's the money in it. I put in a five-dollar bill. Colonel seen me, and he registered the letter himself."

Theron, who had listened with an unusual grimness to his plaint, told him curtly that he would report it to the Colonel. He did not expect the Colonel to grin savagely. "Do you reckon he put any money in the letter?" growled he, under his white mustache. "They said he had something to do with the train robbers. He's just the kind of white-livered, plausible feller likely to do such a thing!"

"For God's sake, don't let us suspect people without good reason, sir!" Theron cried, with most unusual agitation.

"Well, never mind," said the Colonel, staring a little, "I have a clue. You needn't be afraid I shall do anything hastily—no, sir!"

But, as the Colonel had done things hastily and no otherwise all his life, Theron was not relieved. He went away, because he, who prided himself on his composure, his

man-of-the-world's steadiness, could not keep the muscles of his mouth from quivering, for he was sure it was not Gode.

He had become interested and anxious, and, seeing, with some amusement, that the Colonel was making his own researches, he determined to turn detective on his own account. "The dear old fellow is trying to astonish me with his successes," he said to himself, shrugging his shoulders. "I shall have to try to prevent his astonishing me with an awful break somewhere." So, many a night, secretly, had he entered the store and slept, as well as he could, on a rug spread over an unused mattress in a room downstairs. He did not go every night, but every night on his return from the Colonel's he used to walk around the store. Only once did he ever discover anything. That once changed his whole outlook on life.

It was the very night that, according to the register, Gode's letter must have been posted. Theron had spent a happy evening at the Colonel's. Lee had been gentler and sweeter than usual, and her father had laughingly forced her to exhibit certain dainty feminine bits of finery that she had been making, to her lover. "My little girl will have as pretty frocks as any of them," said he, proudly, "if she does spend so little money. I often offer her money, and she won't take it; says I must save it to build the new store."

"Oh, summer things don't cost much money," said Lee, laughing and rumpling her father's silver hair; "one can be right fine on one's fingers and fifty cents."

Then she had kissed her father, with an adorable blush, and Theron had assured himself that, by Jove, he really was genuinely in love, at last. "How pastoral, how innocent, it all is!" he exclaimed, as he walked home in the starlight. "All the detestable fever of our modern life isn't in it, here. I shall write Nell (Nell was his sister) that Lee is worth all the girls in Boston!"

He went home, singing:

"Her eyes are stars of morning,
Her lips are crimson flowers;
Goodnight, goodnight, beloved,
While I watch the weary hours!"

He wrote the letter to his sister, and then another to a college friend, and then, feeling too pleasantly excited for sleep, it occurred to him to go to the store. "Wouldn't it be a joke if I nabbed the fellow tonight," thought he. When he came within sight of the east wall of the store, which obliquely turns to the river and is approached first, his pulses gave a tingling bound. No, it was not imagination; there was a crack of light in one corner of the window. It was not wider than a knife edge, and, while his eyes strained after it, it wavered and disappeared. But he kept on his course. Presently, he could discover another streak. Whatever was hung before the window did not entirely exclude the light. Light is the most persistent and evasive thing in the natural world; it may be in the spiritual, also. So Theron thought, fantastically, as he stole on this betraying gleam, with the footfall of an Indian. In fact, he had pulled off his shoes. Noiselessly, he took one of the empty packing boxes always near the store, carried it to the window, climbed on it and fastened his eye to the crack. The shawl—the screen was a shawl; he could see the fringe—fluttered the least crevice to one side; he could look into the post-office. He saw a portion of the desk. He saw letters strewn about, and a segment of the open mail bag, and a small alcohol lamp, making a blue, uncanny blaze, alongside a single candle. A cup of water was steaming above the blue flames. Some one sat on the high stool before the desk, lifting each letter, fingering it, at last selecting one and holding the flap over the steam of the lamp. The some one was Lee! In nightmares, sometimes, the heart is shaken by a picture focused on a few details, cruelly sharp, the rest a horror and a mystery of darkness. So it was now with him. He saw his love's pure, pale profile, rimmed in light; the light seemed to shine through the envelope, through the delicate fingers that lifted the flap and pulled the bank note; but the rest was black. Did he feel dizzy and thus lose his footing, or did the insecure box give way? The light went out, and he ran, noiselessly, swiftly, around the corner of the building. He thought that she must have gone to the window and raised it, ever so cautiously, for he heard a muffled creaking. She had

extinguished the light. He panted a minute, beneath the shelter of the steps; but all was still; and, directly, he ran down to the river, and so on, covered by the high banks, until he gained the fields behind his own house, and at last crawled into his own door. No sooner was he home, with a little breath back in his body, than he cursed himself for a fool, that he had not boldly called to Lee and demanded an explanation. At least, he would know the worst; but now—now, his brain burned itself out in miserable questions, accusations, denials, ravings. Why was she there, while her father slept, opening letters?

She came down to the store, in the morning, to buy a "very large, nice dishpan." She looked as fresh and happy, in her blue and white gingham, with her broad hat with the white veil, and her crisp white apron, as if she had stepped out of Arcadia. She blushed happily at his gaze. "Such a d——d undignified tragedy!" groaned Theron to himself, while she discussed the merits of dishpans.

He had a rush of relief at the thought that he must go that day to Memphis on business and be absent for several days. Perhaps when he came back this nightmare would have dissolved itself.

He did not know how he could ever get through the parting without betraying himself; but when the parting came, he kissed Lee with a novel and passionate tenderness.

All the time that he was at Memphis, he was consumed by a longing to get back, only to see her, only to watch her every look and word, and tear out the squalid secret of this mystery. Never, when he had believed implicitly in Lee, had her image pursued him with such a haunting charm. Never had her gayety seemed to him so bright, her unselfishness so lovely, her simplicity so exquisite. "There must be some reason for it," he would plead, answering the sick recoil of his reason and his pride when he remembered; "women are so queer in their notions; but, oh, if I could only wake up and find it all a dream, and my little Lee, just as I thought her, back again!" How strong his hopes were, despite their unreason, he realized by the shock he felt when Gode spoke to him.

During the next two days, Theron was like a man in a

sleep. He became aware of the course of the public suspicion; but it only added an irritating pin-prick to the pain and fear that was tearing his soul. This very day, he had been in a tumult. While he had been watching the grinding, a boy had handed him a note from the Colonel. "Money traced. Am going to see about it before I come home." Only two sentences, but enough to take the pith out of Theron's knees. Then came the news of the inspector's and sheriff's coming, and Theron's irresolution went off in a flash of fear. He had never been so irresolute before. For that matter, he could not recall ever having been irresolute before, in any degree. He had looked at the different courses of action open to him, and chosen what seemed to him the best; and, once chosen, had flung himself into the movement with all the real ardor of his nature. "Now, I am a nerveless, bewildered, cowardly cur," he ground between his teeth; "*I will know what is the truth, and I'll save her, if I have to run away and be chased for it myself.*"

He turned, in a glow of determination, at last. But he did not move. At least, he did not move for a second, and the reason was simple. The mare had made the best of his abstraction. She had pulled her bridle free of the tree, and was grazing, unfettered, at a little distance. At the sound of Theron's voice, she reared her head and gave him a glance of that wicked intelligence to be noticed in animals' faces when they regard themselves as at a safe distance. "Nannie!" called Theron, in tones of silken wooing, with fury in his heart, "Nannie, girl! Here, girl!"

Nannie girl tossed her mane, cut a frolicsome caper with her heels, and then gave Theron a clean view of them, as she galloped off home.

There remained nothing for her master to do but wait for the Colonel. "If he comes this way, as he said, it will be all right," said Theron, "but if he changes his mind and takes the other ford?"

The impetus of this disagreeable idea sent Theron up a tree, from which, over a rank tangle of low undergrowth and swamp, he could survey the other ford, two miles lower down. And there, ambling along beside a buggy, rode the Colonel. Theron knew the slight figure of the inspector,

Platt, and the sheriff's broad shoulders and gray horse. While Theron gazed, his wits congealing at the sight, the buggy turned off into a side road, and the Colonel jogged on alone.

"I may catch him yet, before they join him again," thought Theron, "and find out what they have done and let him see the danger." He slipped down the tree and ran along the road to a cross cut, a mere bridle path, by which he might intercept the Colonel before he came out, just in front of his own home. At college he had been a marvelous runner. He was out of trim now, and he felt it in ten minutes, but he kept on, gradually increasing his pace. On and on he sped, through the woods. The blood pumped a roar in his ears, he felt suffocated, but he knew if he opened his mouth it would be all over with him. On and on he ran, until he reached the road.

The Colonel must have increased his speed, for he was only a speck in the distance, almost at his own gate. Theron shut his teeth and ran on to the village, to the Colonel's house.

A miserable object, ready to drop with fatigue, he was hailed by the inspector, "Say, what's up?"

The Colonel, the inspector and Lee sat on the veranda. They were all smiling, but Lee rose and the smile changed into a look of alarm at his purple face, with the wet hair dragged over the forehead.

Theron sat down, physically unable to walk. He tried to invent some pretext out of his plight to get the Colonel off alone with him. "Horse ran off, and I ran after her," he answered. Then he had to stop to catch his breath before he begged the Colonel to go with him. And, in the pause, the inspector said, "Oh, your horse is all right; I saw her in your yard. And I've some good news for you; we've got the post-office thief!"

"No!" said Theron—he must say something.

"Yes, sir," said the inspector, "and I must make my compliments to the Colonel, and to Miss Rhett, too"—he bowed in Lee's direction—"on a mighty pretty piece of detective work."

"You'll have to explain," said Theron.

The Colonel rubbed his hands, and the inspector handed him the word, as one who could explain better than he.

"It was this way," said the Colonel. "We differed a little about the way to go to work, you remember—when the books came, you understand; so I thought I wouldn't trouble you with my theories."

Theron, who was wiping his damp face, fast growing pale, nodded; he remembered.

"I used to talk things over with Lee, and that was all. You suggested our sending a letter to the different post-offices, and having them, when money was registered, take down the numbers and banks of the bills. The post-offices 'round here, being in stores, generally can see the money without trouble, and we handle most of the money sent from here; they *get* it from us, you understand. Well, we got pretty excited over these robberies. Mr. Dale"—here he beamed on Theron, who sat dazed, mopping his brow—"Mr. Dale had his notion of finding the thief. He was for watching the mail-rider and watching the clerks; and finally he took to sleeping at the store, on the sly"—again a radiant smile at Theron—"and don't you reckon the fool folks about here saw him sneaking over there in the dark, and Lord knows what notions they had, but they came to me." The Colonel laughed, but Lee flushed. "He had reason to suspect me," Theron thought, "and it never entered his honest, trusting head!"

"Yes, sir," continued the Colonel, after a refreshing gulp from a tumbler that looked like a mint bed, "yes, sir, we went to work different ways. I was onto The's game, but he wasn't onto the old man's; and I 'lowed I would give him a surprise—show him they don't keep all the smartness locked up down East. Well, Lee and I went over the books, and we figured it that the way Mr. Holmes made out was to study the situation and then to see what theory would fit *all* the facts. We narrowed the business down until we were pretty sure that it was done here, and done right in our store. Then we put the dogs in, to see if the thief was a stranger or somebody they knew. I had made out a list of the people who lost money, and I had made out a list of the fellers round here mean enough to do such a trick, and

a mighty small list it was, with one man at the head and the same man at the foot."

"Yes," said the inspector, "name of—"

"Pyram Gode, a fellow that bought whisky of a poor devil and then informed on him—a mean, triflin' feller, five miles down the river, living alone and liable to take a boat and scud up here at night. Pyram was in the store the day we lost the key. There's another point against him. Well, I put the key business in your hand, and I kept a lookout for the money, and so did you, but nothing definite turned up until, day ayfter we had those dogs at the store, Pyram comes in and asks for change for a ten-dollar bill—wants to send five dollars to a firm in St. Louis. So I went to the safe and had the clerk bring him out two five-dollar bills, first having him jot down the money. I didn't do it, because my hands were all greasy, coming over from the mill, where I had been fixing the engine. But then a sudden thought struck me. I took the bills in my smeared hand and gave them to Gode. And I saw him put the top one—which had my thumb mark on it, plain—into his envelope. But, instead of giving me the envelope directly, he put it in his pocket while he asked were the robberies over, and then, seeming reassured, he took it out and handed it to me. I took it; and I took it in such a way that my thumb went right over the flap, and there was a seal, as it were, in machine oil. You see I had a notion. Do you know what gave me the notion? That ten-dollar bill Gode gave us was one of the stolen bills. Found the number when I was looking at the list to put in the numbers of the fives. And before I went home to Lee, I did something else. I wrote to the firm that Gode's letter was addressed to, and asked them, explaining why, to please open the letter so as not to disturb the flap, and to kindly send back the envelope to me if the money was gone. And then I took the other two registered letters that we were sending that day and put my miller's seal on *their* flaps, and wrote the same kind of a note to their consignees. They were both from Lee, and contained money for little articles of dry-goods she was purchasing. Daughter, a little more of the julep, please, and give Theron another cup; I see he can't make head or tail out of this story yet."

"I haven't heard the details either, you know," said the inspector, "I think—thank you, Miss Rhett."

"Well," the Colonel continued, evidently enjoying his own periods, "well, I told Lee what I had done. I says, says I, if that rascal is the thief, what he is after now is to show that the robberies went on, regardless of the dogs, so he has posted a letter supposed to contain money, but really not containing a cent. That's why he put the bill in, and that's why he put the letter into his pocket. If you read those books, they put you onto all such little games. *He had another letter, just the same as the first, but without any bill in it!* And he substituted that for the letter with the bill in it, keeping the latter. You got that clear? All right. My theory was to mark the envelope, that if it was opened, it would show it, and if it was *not* opened, then it would show that he had deliberately posted an empty letter, instead of the letter containing money. That is, if it was as I suspected. I marked Lee's letters, to see if they would be tampered with, which I didn't think, for I was plumb sure the dogs would give Pyram a job if he tried to come in. I told all this to Lee, after Theron, who spent the evening, had gone home. Lee wasn't so sure that the envelope couldn't be opened, and she suggested that we take a little alcohol lamp, and go down to the store, and take out her letters and steam them a bit, to see whether the impression would be disturbed and the flap not fit. And that's just what we did."

"Excuse me!" cried Theron. He had knocked over his mint julep glass.

"We did just that very thing," said the Colonel—"stole by night, as if we had been the thief himself, and, as Lee suggested, tried to repeat his performance exactly, as far as her letters were concerned; and we discovered that I was right, and that the envelope couldn't be fitted back exactly—at least, without an immense amount of time and trouble. And, being out prospecting, we examined the windows, and found one with a broken catch, that looked all right, but had, no doubt, been used for his entrances; though, I confess, our southern windows aren't, any of them, burglar-proof. Then the plot thickened. Gode had the idiocy to

spend at this store the very five dollar bill with my mark on it; yes, sir! Then he got word from St. Louis, and complained, and brought the letter from the St. Louis folks—oh, he had it all fixed slick; and that's what caught him, for the envelope came back to me untouched. There it is”—handing a sealed envelope to Theron, who took it mechanically, and staggered as he returned to his seat. “Mr. Platt, here, about the same time, found the locksmiths who made a key for a man whose appearance corresponded with Pyram's; and we got track of the money, too; and the end is, Mr. Platt came down, and now the sheriff is interviewing Mr. Pyram Gode. And what do you say to it all, my son?”

He laid a brown hand on Theron's shoulder, and the inspector laughed.

Theron managed to get on his feet, and make a bow.

“I say,” said he, “that Sherlock Holmes isn't a patch on you, sir, as a detective, and that *I* am the most contemptible chump I know!”

He excused himself presently, to go home and make himself presentable for a little late supper that he insisted on giving; and there was a jolly evening of it; but Nannie was the most astonished horse in Arkansas, for her master flung his arms about her and kissed her and cried like a baby, while such broken exclamations as these were sobbed into her marveling ears: “Oh, you blessed brute! Oh, what a narrow squeak! Oh, what an angel she is! Oh, what a d—d fool I am! Oh, thank the Lord! Such an ass as I was didn't deserve to be saved!”

Nevertheless, he was; and he has been so grateful ever since that the Colonel's wistful smile seldom has occasion to appear.